

Boe

by
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First, there's a planet. Then comes a star, followed by many other stars, and together, they whoosh around a darkness which will, eventually, end them. But the swirl shrinks, fades into the background of others like it, and those fade into the background of yet more galaxies until it's all to one side, and then, to the opposite side, there's darkness again, but of a different kind – this one hasn't swallowed light, and it never will. Instead, it'll keep on reaching, and past it, where everything ends, it reveals itself as a tube that flexes and stretches alongside other tubes, all kept in place by a squarish base.

And the universe gets clearer, easier to grasp, until it's far away enough to look like a hand, and then, there's a noise...

...chuff-chuff-chuff-chuff-chuff-chuff-chuff...

...and smoke dances, expands like everything else in the free space that keeps the claimed ones from eating away at each other, as Boe's tractor pulls on the universe behind him.

It's shaped like a balloon, but wasn't always. Used to just be a blob. Whatever its form, though, there's no taking in the vastness of its horrifying beauty.

Boe's broken his contract, but it doesn't matter. He's basically doing what he's supposed to, only he's given himself an ending – a deadline of sorts – and anyway, this was never meant to go on forever, with or without him, so he'll continue expanding the universe per agreement but when it's time, it's time.

And there is no time, not out here, anyway – out here, there's almost nothing, but *if* there's something, it can't be heavy, and that's why he took the job: to be free of his own weight.

Share freed him.

It's the only time worth remembering. All the seconds ticking up to it are a fog, but the week they spent together left a minute imprint on his guts and this condensing threat reminds them of it. Like all the times before it, it began with darkness: the pavement reached up and lied flat against the side of his face, and he stayed like that for a while, not really thinking, before everything went black.

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There was a floor. Or floorboards, at any rate. They formed a corridor and it had walls, but he couldn't grasp where one wall was compared to the other because things kept changing.

A doorway appeared, probably to his right, and he moved towards it but the wall travelled, and he was going to protest but realized he was too tired – exhausted, actually – and it just came out as an edgeless noise.

It was black. The wall. More dark than black, really, but still...he could've sworn it was white.

The man in the doorway didn't seem familiar, but there was something soothing about him. When Boe finally reached him and touched his blank face, it was as if the man welcomed him not doing anything else – as if he didn't need to smile, or say sorry, or act like he had boundaries. As if he was alright.

Share.

He leaned backwards. Fell into the indigo landscape on the other side. And Boe followed.

There was no sun, but it was obviously daytime. And raining, although Boe couldn't feel it on his skin. And skyscrapers, everywhere. No corner shops or church towers or playgrounds. No, just uniform skyscrapers with grimy facades, and absurdly clean streets down below.

They began walking down the main one.

It occurred to Boe that he hadn't blocked out the sounds yet, and that he would've done if things were the same. There was the usual rumble – so subtle, it seemed to make up the foundation of everything there – but on top of it, softly and without source, more obvious sounds now echoed through the void city: crackles and sweeps, and the melodies of heavy machinery.

Share turned onto a side street, walked Boe down two more blocks, and then went inside a building.

They climbed the stairs until reaching a hallway Boe had been in many times before – identical to the others, with some doors open and others closed. Its walls had been clear blue at some point, but now, they were covered in grey and brown stains.

Share stopped outside one of the doors.

Boe came up to him, waited for him to do something, wasn't thinking, so took a while to understand that this part hadn't changed, got himself inside, assumed Share would want to take him down himself, and so remained standing until the blow landed on his head. Crashed into the wall. Felt his nose leave a first stain.

But fear didn't turn into predictability. No, Share simply left without saying if he'd ever be back, and for the week that followed, for the first time in his life, Boe got to stay present for the escalation of terror.

With every break, his chest got heavier. With every session, more city disappeared behind the window. The walls turned brown and began to smell. Share kept coming and going.

Then, on day seven, he left the room, and Boe thought it was the start of another break until, suddenly, he heard him address someone.

"I know you're there. You can come out now."

A door squeaked as someone stepped into the hallway, and when the little boy came into view Boe did something he'd never done before: he refused.

"NO!"

And Share made the boy stop in front of Boe who looked at his younger self with a grief not felt in decades.

Little Boe's eyes were full of questions, and a willingness to adjust if only told how, and as they finally saw each other clearly – without the grime that had accumulated between them over the years – something tapped on the window.

Boe was too experienced to get up but didn't register the boy moving until it was too late, and before anyone could stop him, he'd opened the window, and countless faces flew in – distorted by too many shades of cruelty on too small a surface – and flapped through the air as the butterfly landed on Boe's knee.

He looked up to gauge Share's reaction, but the faceless one suddenly seemed unresponsive – either that, or he'd lost interest – and so he reached out a broken finger, and the butterfly allowed itself to be brought closer.

It spread its wings to show off their intricate pattern, and seeing his tormentors so effortlessly reduced, all Boe could

think was why – *why* – does this keep happening to me? And as he thought that, the butterfly revealed its back...

you never left

...and he can't say what that did to him. Only that there was a sensation so powerful, he couldn't take it in, and that before he knew it, he was out of there.

Skyscrapers shrunk to nothing.

Smells and sounds disappeared.

A planet fell away.

Constellations folded into rings of glitter, and then he found himself surrounded by unclaimed lands. And he tried them out – he really did – but wasn't welcome anywhere, because there were no people there to be welcomed by and so he kept on moving, and after a distance great enough to encompass everything, he realized that there was simply nowhere for him to be.

The only lands where he could stand tall were lands with no one around to knock him down. The only places with nothing against him were places that held no will. He was a mistake, that's all – allowed to be, now he'd happened, but unwanted.

He'd been holding on for too long with nothing holding him back, and so, now accepting his fate, he let go, and drifted through a final darkness before entering this peaceful absence.

This he could belong to, if not be a part of.

A contract was made, and he's been here ever since.

Too shy to explore his surroundings, he focused on the job, but after a while he just couldn't help himself – the blob was too fascinating. From inside the tractor cabin, he saw stars with strange *connections* – embedded in pink and orange smoke, or gathered around lights like an astral family – and having only known *cooperation*, he wondered what he'd been missing out on, and so he worked up the courage to go in only to discover that he couldn't get past the expansion. And he wondered why, because he'd thought it'd be okay so long as the tractor kept going while he was out. And then he wondered how the blob stayed a blob despite only getting pulled on in that one place,

and then it dawned on him...

...that he wasn't pulling on it. It expands without him. Of course it does. He's just here to stay complacent, tricked into yet another cooperation.

Realizing this could've been the end of Boe, and given time it probably would've been, but in the midst of his embarrassment, a speck of light made it through the darkness, drifted across the absence, and entered the cabin, and as it turned on the spot, wings unfolded to reveal a gauzy back...

you never left

...and suddenly, it all made sense: it's not that the blob won't let him in, but that it *can't*, because he's already somewhere else – trapped as ever. And he's sick of being trapped, of being made to cooperate, of being the one who gives up first.

He wants change.

Any change.

He wants to fight.

So he's broken his contract, but it doesn't matter. He's basically doing what he's supposed to, only he's given himself an ending – a deadline of sorts – until the seconds start ticking again, because it's time.

Time to face Share.

It didn't occur to him that the butterfly had been Share's until it was betrayed by its twin, but that's not his fault and he won't be embarrassed: shame has finally matured into a searing anger.

Won't turn around either, because the blob's got his back. Neither intended getting attached to the other, but it happened, and when he set course for his end, it followed him, expanded for him, stretched into a balloon just to be with him – no less inseparable than any other cooperation.

As anger aims for indigo dust, guts are reminded of the broken body still in there, waiting to see which universe will wipe the other out.

Free space narrows to a corridor.

Seconds begin to tick.

Boe's tractor closes in on the hand...

...chuff-chuff-chuff-chuff-chuff-chuff-chuff...

...and its fingers flex and stretch, flex and stretch, as if anticipating a catch